
CORRESPONDENTS

by Ben Jeapes

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He was going to be late. He had come so far and he was going to be late ...

As the correspondent entered the city, he began instinctively to compile his report. He scanned the streets and the crowds, taking in the dirt and the smell and the squalor. He recorded the contrast between the magnificent stone churches and colleges and the ramshackle common buildings; he noted the great, blank walls that so cleanly divided Oxford between town and gown with the profane real world on one side and the sacred world of scholarship on the other. The jumble of ideas and themes would all be sorted out in his report, when he had a moment.

He really ought to be getting on. A thought called up a street map of Oxford in the sixteenth century and he saw that he was almost there.

He was, indeed, too late, at least for the preliminaries. St Mary's church loomed up ahead and a crowd was coming out of it. Some people looked at the correspondent, but then they looked away again without curiosity; Oxford was big enough for strangers to be unremarkable, and who would pass up this chance for free entertainment? The correspondent was unnoticed as he followed with the crowd after the centre of attraction – Thomas Cranmer, former Archbishop of Canterbury, due to be burnt at the stake for his Protestantism. It was March 21st, 1556.

The crowd reached Broad Street where the pile was waiting for Cranmer, who had resigned himself to his fate. He stood placidly in the middle of a crowd of angry, gesticulating men, each one presenting his own view of why Cranmer should recant, even at this last minute. The correspondent continued his report.

'Cranmer is surrounded by worthies talking to him, hoping for a final recantation that will spare him the flames. The mayor is on the verge of tears. The man in scholarly robes and cap on the right must be the bachelor of divinity that the records call Elye, and he is looking more and more put out by Cranmer's stubbornness. The two friars with him also appear to be losing their patience rapidly. I will try and hear their exact words ...'

The Archbishop began to undress, eventually to stand in just a shirt. He was trussed up to the stake and a cry went up from the crowd as the torch was applied. The correspondent applied his skills to the pile; a measuring rule appeared in his vision against it and he saw that it was twenty feet across at the base and ten feet high. It must have been well-oiled as it caught quickly, though putting out more smoke than flame. The correspondent stood, an island of calm detachment in the seething crowd, recording Cranmer's last act of defiance as the flames rose:

‘He has managed to work a hand free and has thrust it into the fire ... he has for the last time renounced his former recantation, which resulted in his watching his colleagues Ridley and Latimer go to the stake, and declared that this hand that wrote it shall be the first part of him to be burnt ... his face shows the pain, yet he has made no further noise.’

He looked around him to gauge the crowd’s reactions. Some were openly weeping, whether for a lost friend or for a soul consigned to their Hell he had no idea, but he recorded it anyway.

Others were less upset.

‘Good riddance!’ a voice yelled; a chorus of cheers showed that at least some of the crowd agreed. The correspondent looked over at the speaker who was himself looking around, apparently pleased by the reaction to his words.

‘The heretic had it coming!’ he shouted, to more cheers. ‘God bless the Queen, dragging this country of ours back to the true faith, never mind that German monk’s ramblings ...’

The correspondent was struck by the sheer tide of emotion around him, the currents of hate and anger that buffeted him. As he looked away he inadvertently caught the eye of a man standing by him. He had a feeling the man had been looking at him.

‘An oaf,’ the man said, quietly. He was well-dressed and sported a neatly trimmed beard. The skin around his eyes was crinkled, which gave him a friendly and trustworthy look; the eyes themselves also seemed friendly, but every now and then flashed with a hardness that indicated he maybe did not concur with everything the other man was saying.

‘His name is Morris,’ the man continued in the same quiet, conversational way. ‘He is not entirely uneducated; he studied for the priesthood and failed. Do his words disturb you, friend?’

‘There was a trial and Cranmer was judged guilty,’ said the correspondent, his first words spoken out loud since arriving in this time. ‘His fate is no more than the law.’

The man laughed.

‘Ah, you give a safe reply! Friend, do I detect that you have travelled far to be here?’

‘I have this day arrived in Oxford,’ the correspondent said. ‘I am come from-’
(From where? Where would be a good place?)

To his surprise the man clapped a hand on his shoulder.

‘The inns hereabouts will cost you a pretty penny, friend. I invite you to my humble abode. For, as the Greek proverb says-’

-but it was not Greek that the man spoke. The man dropped, instead, into the language of the Home Time.

‘Welcome to this era, friend.’

The correspondent’s eyes widened, but he smiled and said, in English:

‘I accept your most kind invitation, sir. But first I must finish here.’

* * *

They waited a bit longer. The pile of wood was allowed to burn its course; the dead Archbishop sagged limply from his stake in the middle and the stench of burning flesh added itself to the clean, pungent wood smoke. The correspondent added the detail to the report.

He and his new friend stayed until the crowd began to drift away. Cranmer’s charred body was taken down and quickly taken away by a group of people: friends or enemies, the correspondent didn’t know. He considered following them but decided against it. Cranmer was dead and it was his execution, not his burial, that had had the effect on history.

‘You are ready?’ the other man said. The correspondent nodded.

‘My coach is this way,’ the man said, leading the correspondent away from the crowd. ‘The driver is a servant of this time, so until we are alone we must speak only of inconsequentialities.’

‘Of course,’ the correspondent agreed.

The coach took them to a well-appointed house, black and white in the manner of the time, in Headington, on the outskirts of Oxford. The house was large enough to have a hall; a large, muscular man lounged here, apparently chatting up a woman. They both jumped to their feet expectantly when the two came in; the correspondent studied them in a glance and decided they must be servants.

‘Carry on with your work, Rachel,’ his new friend said. The woman bustled out through a door. ‘Wilf is my factotum and a most loyal man to have around. But be about your duties whilst I entertain my friend, Wilf.’

‘Yes, Mr Taylor.’ The man left, but with a curious glance at the visitor.

‘As I said, I have servants of this time. Now, in here,’ the man said, leading the correspondent through to the main room. He sat his guest down and called for beer from the housekeeper. Eventually they were alone.

‘We can use the language of the Home Time, if such would make you more comfortable,’ the man said.

‘Please.’

‘Fine.’ The man easily slid into his native tongue. He sat and lounged in a chair. ‘You know, I saw you from a mile off. Oh! We haven’t been introduced. My name’s Richard Taylor. At least, that’s the name I use most of the time.’

‘I’m ...’ The correspondent hadn’t thought of what name to adopt. ‘John Smith?’

Taylor winced.

‘Terrible. At least call yourself ... Edward. A good name for this time, after the late King, Queen Mary’s brother.’

‘Edward Smith?’

‘It will do.’ Taylor grinned. ‘Ah, it’s good to see someone I can have an intelligent conversation with!’

‘How did you spot me?’ Edward said.

‘Oh, not from anything you were doing. From what you were not doing, Edward. Everyone’s face showed something, but you just stood there, taking it all in. And you have the look that we all have. I’ve seen it before-’

‘How?’ Edward said, surprised. There was no actual rule against correspondents mixing, so far as he knew, but they were meant to be few and far apart enough not to bump into each other.

‘Well, I’ve been around for a long time and I know the kind of thing that correspondents go for.’

‘But aren’t you-’

‘I was,’ Taylor said gently. ‘I’ve retired.’ He waved a hand around him to indicate the house and servants, while Edward’s mind wrestled with the idea of a retired correspondent. ‘I’m a merchant of some success. Knowing what the market will do is a major advantage. I’ll have to move on eventually but I’m comfortable for now.’ He changed the subject. ‘So, how did you end up as a correspondent?’

‘I don’t really know,’ Edward said. He tapped his head. ‘I only arrived this morning ...’

Taylor nodded, a trifle knowingly.

‘... and your memory’s still a bit jumbled. I understand.’ They had to play with the memory of a correspondent. They already knew every detail of his career – what articles he would file, whether he would survive or not – but so that he could act as a free agent, they could not let him know. ‘Five hours down, five hundred years to go ... do you think you’ll make it?’

The Home Time could transmit someone as far back as they liked. They would not send the recall equipment further back than the twenty-first century, where it was just the right side of anachronism. If you were sent further back than that, you walked home.

‘I hope so,’ Edward said. ‘It shouldn’t be too difficult, should it? How long have you been here?’

‘Me? Well, just say my first big report was an interview with Alfred the Great.’

‘That’s a long time!’

‘You manage,’ Taylor said with a shrug. ‘I’ve lost count of the lurgies I’ve caught. I’ve had cholera, malaria, the Black Death and-’ [he grinned] ‘-some unmentionable

kinds of pox, but we always recover. No, keep your head low, always cheer for the winning side and you get along just fine. I'm thinking of taking a ship to America, you know. Head out west, where the white man won't end up for another couple of centuries and staying alive will be a whole lot easier.'

'That's a thought,' Edward said. 'And in the Home Time they'll love to read stories about North America developing.'

'Yes, well,' Taylor said with another shrug. 'That too.'

'You don't sound too enthusiastic.'

'I've grown fond of being alive, mate!' Taylor laughed. 'I can't blame you, your conditioning's still fresh in your mind, but you do remind me of Roger. Roger Woods, your predecessor.'

'My predecessor?'

'The one I imagine they sent you to replace. He died yesterday, mugged in a back alley, massive trauma, killed immediately. The damage was too much at one time for his body to cope with.' Taylor held up a finger. 'Remember that – we're not completely immortal. Anyway, that's how I guessed you would turn up. They were bound to send someone to cover Cranmer's execution – it's just the kind of thing to appeal to them and Roger covered Latimer and Ridley last year. Point is, he was keen on the job too. He would report on his latest meal if nothing better showed up.'

'But not you?' Edward asked.

'After seven centuries, mate, you get independent-minded.' Taylor jabbed a finger at him. 'Edward, the people who sent us here are the biggest, smuggest, most amoral bunch of hypocrites that the world will ever see! Think about it. What kind of researcher just reads second-hand reports? The best kind goes out there in the field and gets his own hands dirty, but how many correspondents do you think are academics from the Home Time? Oh no, far too dangerous! They send us suckers back, give us blithe assurances about how dandy it will all be with these organic survival machines that we call bodies, see you in the Home Time, chaps, and they sit comfortably in their offices and read our reports. How much loyalty could you ever feel to a crowd like that?'

Edward sat with his mouth open. This was heresy, this was ...

Taylor checked himself and shrugged.

'At least, that's what I think,' he said. 'Do you know what the last report I filed was? 'Sod off, you bastards, I'm my own boss now.' He grinned lazily. 'That was in 1473. Now I just hang about, doing a bit of this and that ... sometimes it gets boring, but I'm happy.'

Edward explored the back of his mind again, just to remind himself it was there. The black, closed-off bit.

‘There’s always the Death Sentence,’ he said uncertainly. The solution for those correspondents who couldn’t face the thought of living as long as the twenty-first century; a collection of nonsense words that lurked at the back of the brain, behind several mental guards, impossible to activate by chance, but which would if desired simply switch the brain and body off. For ever.

‘There is, but it’s not for me,’ Taylor said flatly. ‘Listen, Edward, you’re welcome to put up here for as long as you like, but not if you’re going to start preaching, got that?’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it!’ Edward said hastily. ‘You’re the boss.’ He thought quickly about the best way of proving his good will towards his host. ‘Um – tell me about this time.’

‘This time?’ Taylor laughed. ‘This morning’s affair was a good sample of this time. Mary Tudor is determined to bring this country back to the Roman way and will tolerate no opposition. Concepts like ‘consensus’ have yet to be invented. People will suffer endless agonies, even death, over their right to say their prayers their way. Ordinary, decent folk will happily see their neighbours tortured unspeakably for not using Latin on the right occasions. It’s considered that the suffering of the flames at the stake purges you of sin and makes you ready for heaven. Certain kinds of execution are seen as a privilege!’

‘And no one stops to ask why?’

‘No, of course not! Get it into your head, Edward, that people here don’t think like we do. Rational thought counts for nothing and emotion counts for everything. Love thy neighbour and then slaughter him – that’s the locals for you.’

‘That man at the stake-’ Edward said. Taylor laughed.

‘Ah, yes, friend Morris! He’s a bitter man. He caught the priesthood bug in King Edward’s reign but he was too Roman in his ways and was sent down from his college. The country now follows the Pope again, but they still prefer their priests to be motivated by something more than sheer hatred of Protestants. So, now Morris haunts the town with his cronies, looking out for the smallest sign of heresy. You heard him talk. He’s a bore and a bigot, but I’d love to get him into debate. He should be able to provide some reasons for his beliefs, rather than spout what the priests tell him. But not in these times, I think.’

‘You wouldn’t get very far.’

‘Indeed.’

Edward digested this all.

‘Thank you. I’ll remember that.’ He wanted to like Richard Taylor but his conditioning cried out against this man, this renegade correspondent. Maybe he should leave. ‘Richard, I’m grateful for your help, but I will have to go ...’

Taylor held up a hand.

‘Of course. But ...’ He smiled. ‘I said I like the company. Can’t you just stay a while? A couple of days?’

* * *

Edward lay in his bed. His eyes stared blankly towards the ceiling and though it was dark he could easily see the plaster above him. He had turned all his senses to maximum while he prepared his report – a habit that Taylor had said it would be useful to acquire, should anyone at some future date come by and find the correspondent apparently in a coma.

Images flickered through his mind and he separated them into two files: one that was his actual report on the execution and one that would be a discourse on life in the sixteenth century in general, once he had sufficient supplementary data.

Into the former he put the straightforward sensory data of the day. The first thing he had noticed after arriving was the purity of the air he breathed. He had arrived in the countryside; when he had got close to town he had known it because the wind changed and the air he was breathing had been the air that blew out of Oxford. It was the air of a society where the horse was the main form of transport and the populace believed that baths transmitted disease.

There was more in this vein. Oxford in the rain; the people; the zeitgeist. To it he added those things which had impacted on his emotions – the aura of the crowd around the stake; the hatred; the bigotry. The sheer animal unreason of it all.

He valiantly resisted the temptation to include mention of Taylor. Taylor had been good to him and had committed no crime, but still Edward doubted his masters would approve.

When the report was finished, he breathed a sigh. His first! Now it just needed filing. The Moon was up, so-

He *thought*, and a tone that only he could hear sounded in his head.

‘AL/1556, stand by,’ said a voice. Then, ‘AL/1556, transmit.’ He *thought* again and in a couple of seconds it was over.

‘Report received, AL/1556,’ said the voice.

His report was filed. A big moment! Perhaps tomorrow he would celebrate with Taylor. Taylor had gone sour on the correspondents, but he could probably still recall the elation of his own first report and would understand what it meant to Edward.

Edward got out of bed and strolled over to the window to look at the Moon. Somewhere up there was the station, awaiting retrieval by those who had put it there, centuries from now. The thought was comforting. He had no doubt that sooner or later in his career he would feel mighty lonely and it would be good to know that up there was something else from the far future. A link to the Home Time.

Edward turned back to the bed in preparation for sleep – and turned back to the window again, for within the last second he had heard voices outside in the street.

He would never have detected them without his correspondent's abilities. One was Taylor's.

There was no reason why Taylor should not wish to leave his house late at night – but after supper that night Taylor had gone out of his way to say that he was having an early night in preparation for a busy day tomorrow.

Edward was barely responsible for his actions in slipping out of the house and tailing his host. He was a correspondent.

* * *

Taylor was not alone – he was accompanied by Wilf, the man that Edward had seen on first entering Taylor's house that day. For his servant's benefit – on his own he could have managed without, as Edward was doing – Taylor carried a lamp. It did not give much light.

They came within sight of a pub in St Clements, across the river from the main town, and the two men stopped, waiting in shadow. It was closing time and the clientele was leaving. A crowd of men came out all together and at the centre Edward saw the loud-mouthed man from the stake – the failed priest, Morris. Taylor and Wilf followed after him at a safe distance, themselves now acting like men who had just left the pub. Morris and his friends took no notice. One by one Morris's friends peeled off until Morris was on his own.

Morris didn't notice them until it was too late. When they jumped on him he bellowed and lashed out and if one of his blows had connected it would have hurt, but he had not been trained as Taylor had. Before anyone around had plucked up the courage to investigate the disturbance, the two men and their unconscious captive had vanished into the night.

* * *

Edward watched through a crack in the planks that formed the wall of a barn outside Oxford.

Morris woke up slowly. There was a flickering light from a lantern nearby, surrounded by a red glow from a brazier next to it. Irons stuck out of the glowing coals. He lay on a pile of straw.

He squinted groggily up at the two men who stood over him; Wilf smirked and Taylor had an expression of mild curiosity. He wriggled; he was stripped naked and the straw seemed to irritate his back and buttocks.

Then his mind cleared and he lunged up, to find that he was tied down with high-quality hemp.

'What d'you want? Where is this?'

'Where no one will hear you, Morris,' Taylor said.

'What do you want?' Morris shouted again.

‘You are a good Catholic, are you not, Morris?’ Taylor said. ‘A loyal subject of the Bishop of Rome?’

‘What’s it to you?’ Morris asked cautiously.

‘Are you?’

‘I am,’ Morris said. His voice trembled and Taylor smiled. The word had not yet been invented for that smile; it made Morris shiver. Perhaps it was then that Morris knew he was dead.

‘Good. Wilf, fetch the tools.’

Wilf walked over to Morris’s left. The captive strained to see what he was doing but the man was too far behind him.

‘You were heard,’ Taylor said, ‘at the stake today, expressing approval for the execution of Archbishop Cranmer.’

Sweat broke out on Morris’s forehead. Edward took in the dilated eyes and the flared nostrils and diagnosed the symptoms of terror.

‘D-did I?’ Morris said.

‘The heretic had it coming. God bless the Queen, dragging this country of ours back to the true faith, never mind that German monk’s ramblings,’ Taylor said. ‘My memory never fails me.’

Wilf walked back into Morris’ view, laden down with tools. Taylor took a blacksmith’s pliers off him and held them out, looking at them thoughtfully.

‘Those were your words,’ he said. ‘You condone the burning of heretics.’

‘Ave Maria, gratia plena, dominus tecum, benedicta tuum ...’ Morris had made up his mind that he was about to be a martyr to the faith. Taylor nodded at Wilf.

‘Dominus tecum, do what you want with ‘em,’ he said. He handed the pliers back. ‘Begin.’

Morris’s gabbling rattle of Latin got faster and higher as the pliers closed around his left big toe, then turned into a scream as Wilf closed the handles and bone crunched.

Wilf released the pliers and Morris gulped air in huge sobbing breaths while the pain died down to a throb. Then he vomited.

‘I’ll not recant,’ Morris vowed as his chest heaved. ‘I’ll not turn to that pagan devil Luther.’

‘I don’t want you to turn to Luther, Morris. I want you to justify your faith to me. Why should Cranmer have been executed?’

‘He was a traitor! He renounced the true faith-’

‘He wrote a prayer book in the English tongue. Where was the treason in that?’

‘It was a blasphemy! It-’

‘Why?’

‘The Latin tongue is the tongue of the true-’

‘Why?’

‘I’ll not answer your damn questions! Rot in the hell that is waiting for you!’

‘Wilf,’ Taylor said. Wilf came forward with the pliers again. ‘The other toe.’

* * *

Edward Smith recorded it all.

At first he had intended to march straight in. Wilf he could handle and he should be well matched for Taylor as well.

But a voice inside him had said, watch.

Then he had seen the torture begin and the voice inside him had said, report. After all, it was only his sense of propriety that was outraged. He felt – could feel – no sympathy for a man of this time.

By chance and by instinct, he was compiling a report in his mind. Provisional title: Anatomy of a torture session.

‘The subject’s faith is firmly lodged in his mind and he will consider no alternatives. He was asked if he believes in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. He does. He was asked if he believes in loving his enemies, as Jesus commanded. He does. He was asked if he believes that heretics should be tortured and put to death. He does. Asked why, he stated that torture will speed them on their way to heaven. He was asked, does he believe he will go to heaven after this evening? At this point he invariably lapses into Ave Marias or Pater Nosters.

‘The man named Wilf applied the pliers to his other big toe and he would only repeat the same points. After that Taylor instructed Wilf to move on to the branding irons. These were applied to his chest, his stomach and his genitals. Wilf then applied the thumb screws. It appears that torture instruments should be applied singly: if applied two or more at a time they are less effective, as the subject’s concentration is divided between two sources of pain ...’

There was more, much more, and Edward took it all in. He was trembling and sweating: it was like being tied down and made to watch. He wanted to feel Morris’s pain – he knew that he should and he despised himself for the great nothingness inside him where, as a human being, his sympathy for Morris should have been.

Yet he could only report. He found himself already planning ahead: he would reopen the file later and flesh it out a bit to turn it into a report for transmission. Who would be interested? Perhaps he should make several versions. A dry, factual one for the historians; a more chatty version for the general readership ...

Eventually Wilf said, ‘People will soon be about, Mr Taylor.’

Taylor checked his inner clock.

‘True,’ he said. ‘I doubt we will get any more out of Morris.’ He looked down at the broken, twisted body, which they had been careful to keep alive. Two tortured, animal eyes stared back up at him.

‘You have been a great help, Morris,’ he said. He shook his head, genuinely baffled. ‘Amazing. You really do believe it, don’t you? And you don’t see any contradiction, any conflict ... mad. Quite, quite mad.’

He turned to Wilf.

‘He will soon be dead. Come, Wilf.’

Wilf was already heading for the door. With a calm, smooth motion Taylor pulled out a knife from his cloak and plunged it into Wilf’s back, piercing his heart. Wilf arched backwards and cried out, once. Then he toppled over rigidly, like a falling plank. Taylor casually stepped over the body. He stopped when he saw Edward standing in the entrance to the barn.

The correspondent was pale and trembling. His instinct when Taylor called a halt to the session had been to walk back to Oxford, now that the report was over. Walking instead into the barn to confront Taylor had been like walking through treacle.

‘Hello, Edward,’ Taylor said.

‘Kill him,’ Edward said.

‘Why?’

‘Kill him!’

‘You kill him.’

Edward paused, then unsteadily walked forward, keeping an eye on Taylor. Taylor’s hands were both free, but he might have had another knife hidden away.

Edward stopped by the brazier and studied Morris carefully.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘but you wouldn’t want to live. Sixteenth century medicine will never make you whole again.’ He put a hand to Morris’ neck, spreading his fingers out over the throat. Morris whimpered weakly. ‘I’m sorry,’ Edward said again, and squeezed. Once Morris was dead, Edward kicked the brazier so that it toppled over and its coals spilled out onto the straw. The fire caught and spread around the body.

‘He is doing you a favour, Morris,’ Taylor said. ‘The flames will speed you to heaven.’ He turned to go. Edward took one last look at Morris, and followed. As they left the barn, the flames were catching hold of the walls.

They walked for a minute without saying anything. Then Taylor stopped and looked back.

‘Quite a sight, isn’t it?’ Taylor said in the Home Time tongue. Edward carefully positioned himself so that he could see Taylor and the barn. It was burning merrily and the flickering light lit up the countryside all around.

‘Why did you do it?’ Edward said.

‘You don’t know what to think, do you, Edward?’ Taylor said. ‘You know you ought to be feeling horror and revulsion towards me, and you want to, but you can’t. Your conditioning won’t let you. Morris and Wilf were both of this time, you think, so why should their fate bother you?’

‘Why did you do it?’

‘Why? Curiosity, really. I wanted to see what makes a man like that tick. I don’t file reports any more, but I still have this urge to find things out. I can’t help it.’

‘Wilf?’

‘Wilf was just as bad as Morris, but a Protestant. I’d already had a long conversation with him about his faith and I couldn’t hang on to him after tonight, could I? He may not have known the exact word for blackmail, but he would have understood the concept. So, Edward! What are you going to do with the report you’ve been compiling? Will you be transmitting it? Of course, that will make you seem like an accomplice to the Home Time, especially after killing Morris-’

‘The report is over,’ Edward said, in a voice that was not his own.

‘Sorry?’

Edward swung round to look at him.

‘The report is over,’ he said, then, in a more normal but frightened voice, ‘Richard, there’s something inside me-’

Edward was looking out of his own eyes as if his body belonged to someone else. From the back of his mind, the sealed off bit, something had come forward and taken over. The words that came out of Edward’s mouth were not of his own volition. He heard himself say something that was almost, but not quite, the words that triggered the Death Sentence. They did not trigger his-

-they triggered Taylor’s. He heard the correspondent gasp, once, and then the man collapsed.

Edward stared down at him for a moment. He knelt to check the vital signs. Taylor was dead.

‘What-’ Edward murmured.

‘His conditioning had broken down,’ said the stranger in his mind. ‘Our correspondents must move unnoticed among the natives, but he took a delight in causing them pain and using them for his own ends. We were aware from correspondent TW/1329, Roger Woods, that an aberrant correspondent was operating in the sixteenth century. We suspect Taylor killed him.’

‘He killed a correspondent?’

‘He reverted to type.’

‘But ... but-’

‘We needed to gather evidence against Taylor, Correspondent AL/1556. No charges are held against you and your report will make most interesting reading.’

‘But ... if you wanted the report anyway ...’ Edward said helplessly.

‘It is unimportant.’

‘But am I really a correspondent? Or am I just a machine-?’

‘You are a correspondent who was needed for this one mission. I shall now erase myself and you will be a free agent again.’

The thing was there for a second longer, then was gone, its mission fulfilled. Edward wondered how many other programs he had lodged in the back of his mind.

He began to walk back towards Oxford, his mind already busy polishing up his report.

Reverted to type?

He could not put Taylor out of his mind. Things were whirling about in his mind and falling into place – a whole series of deductions from a small amount of data.

Reverted to type. Taylor’s conditioning broke down and he reverted to type. What kind of man had Taylor been in the Home Time? The same as he was here?

What would be the punishment for similar activity in the Home Time? A brain wipe? A life sentence?

(Several life sentences ... ?)

Was this how they got correspondents to volunteer? Edward stopped in his tracks at the thought. Were they all like Taylor, given the chance to redeem themselves by going into the past and living several lifetimes over – or not – to make it back home again?

What kind of a man had he, Edward Smith, been in the Home Time? Was this why his memory was so fuzzy?

He forced these thoughts to the back of his mind. He was a correspondent first and foremost. He knew his duty and it lay with his masters, centuries hence.

Taylor’s conditioning had taken seven centuries to crack and Edward only had five centuries to go until he could transfer back. He could last that long.

Surely ...